U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge

Proposal to Protect and Restore The San Joaquin River Riparian Corridor

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service halfway through the planning process for the proposed expansion of the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge. The proposed expansion presents a unique conservation opportunity to restore a major migratory corridor through the center of California to benefit the birds of the Pacific Flyway and numerous other wildlife species.

The Service is proposing to expand the San Joaquin River NWR and acquire up to 22,156 acres along the lower San Joaquin, Tuolumne, and Stanislaus Rivers to protect and restore riparian habitat. The draft Environmental Assessment evaluates two action alternatives. One alternative would expand the Refuge boundary south to the confluence with the Merced River. The other alternative would include this southern expansion, and would also expand the Refuge boundary north to Lathrop. Expanding the Refuge boundary would allow the Service to acquire lands and develop conservation agreements with willing landowners.

The proposed expansion would connect the Refuge with the Grasslands Ecological Area, a 160,000-acre mosaic of Central Valley floor habitats located in the historic floodplain of the San Joaquin River. This vast network of freshwater marshes, alkali grassland and riparian thickets is the result of decades of collaborative conservation involving private duck clubs, CA State Parks, CA Department of Fish and Game, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Maintaining connectivity between the remaining natural areas and minimizing further fragmentation is crucial to the long term viability of California's natural heritage.

Although currently degraded, the San Joaquin River basin once supported a highly diverse ecosystem. The Valley floor was composed of a complex matrix of channels, swales, ridges, flood basins, and sloughs that were periodically inundated and supported a great diversity of permanent and seasonal wetlands, riparian scrub and forest, and aquatic habitat teeming with fish and wildlife. These seasonal and permanent freshwater marsh and wetlands were, and continue to be, important habitat for migratory birds of the Pacific Flyway. Tens of millions of migratory waterfowl darkened the skies each winter. Nearly 50,000 acres of riparian forest rich with neotropical migratory birds and unique small mammal species flanked the streams and rivers in the basin. Historically, the San Joaquin River's Chinook salmon runs accounted for up to 40 percent (over 300,000) of the San Joaquin Valley's total Chinook salmon.

Historic impacts, such as gravel mining, construction of dams and diversions, and habitat clearing, dewatered the river and destroyed the surrounding wetlands that used to span a wide swath of the valley floor. Current threats, especially habitat destruction and insufficient water supply, continue to degrade the river and can derail efforts to bring the river back to life. Today, the San Joaquin River is one of the most highly-altered systems in the state. For decades, the diversion of water from the San Joaquin has caused at least 20 miles of the River to be dry for much of the year and nearly all of the riparian vegetation has been cleared. Less than 10 percent of historic riparian habitat exists and wetland habitats have shrunk to roughly five percent of their former extent. This loss of habitat has had substantial effects on migratory and resident bird populations.

Through the proposed boundary expansion, the Service seeks to build on the success of its existing refuges and those of its many partners to conserve and restore fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats along San Joaquin River for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

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Alternatives